TL 1360

Underground leaders on the clandestine movement

On a visit to Jakarta last November, Liem Soei Liong of TAPOL interviewed three activists in the East Timorese clandestine movement. The three men are identified here only by initials.

'MKR' from the Mambai tribe, was 11 years old in 1975. His father was a coffee plantation official in Ermera, under the Portuguese. When war broke out, MKR knew little about politics:

The first thing was that we were forced to learn Indonesian and other things unrelated to our own history. In time, we started wondering why the war had started and why people were holding out in the bush to defend our people to the death against the Indonesian army. Everything was in stark contrast to the 12 months before the war started in 1975. We realised that something terrible had happened. We were a people living under great oppression, defending our aspirations against the Indonesian army which was suppressing our aspirations.

I went to secondary school (SMA) in Kupang, then to university in Jakarta. At college that I met older people with a better understanding of politics; some had fought in the bush. I learnt many things from them and wanted to become involved.

'FF' was studying at Francisco Xavier School at the time of the Indonesian invasion. He became involved with Fretilin in August 1975 and joined the school-pupils organisation, Unetim.

When Fretilin took control of East Timor and set up a de facto administration, I was sent to organise people in villages and towns in preparation for the coming difficulties. I attended the independence proclamation on 28 November 1975. When the invasion occurred, I fled to Ailieu with Fretilin leaders, then to Same and Kablake. I was in Quelicai for more than a year and then went east, to Viqueque-Ossu where I mobilised the masses to face the Indonesians.

In July 1979, I was at the Matebian base when Indonesia began its mass extermination campaign. In November, we were forced to let the population surrender, while I escaped to another region. There were many difficulties there but we began to learn how to organise the masses and prepare for underground work.

On 15 July 1979, I was arrested with four friends by the Indonesians and brought to Dili. In 1980, I became active in the underground movement.

'ML' was just finishing school in 1975 and left Dili with Fretilin when Indonesia invaded.

I helped gather information and politicise society. I stayed in the mountains till 1979. After Indonesia's campaign to encircle and annihilate Fretilin, we realised that the balance of forces was very unfavourable so we surrendered, but this was not the end of the struggle. We surrendered in order the continue the war in the towns. That was our task.

How many East Timorese men and women are studying in Indonesia at present?

[MKR] I would say about a thousand, studying at various universities in Bali and Java – in Malang, Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Salatiga, Solo, Jakarta and Kupang, as well as in Kalimantan.

What control do the Indonesians exert on you?

[FF] The intelligence keep a close watch on young East Timorese and on people in general. They realise that it is the younger generation will carry the struggle forward until we achieve independence. Experience since 1975 shows that our young men and women are the ones who have died in the struggle – thousands have been exiled to prison camps.

When the underground was set up in 1980, many who took part were from the younger generation. At the time of the rebellion on 10 June 1980, many young people took part, were arrested and exiled. This showed the Indonesians that the main force involved in the struggle was the youth. Facilities given to our youth by the Indonesians have not meant that Indonesia has persuaded the youth of East Timor to turn their backs on the struggle.

Ever since 1980, young East Timorese wherever they are in Indonesia are involved in the underground according to their specific circumstances and abilities. The underground is under the leadership of our supreme command.

In the past few years, the Indonesians arrested many students and schoolpupils. But it was harmful to Indonesia's foreign policy; they realised that they could not afford a confrontational approach so they devised a new mechanism – controlling all letters and communications, censoring all letters from abroad and controlling our communications with East Timor.

When any of us goes on vacation to East Timor, they follow us to find out what we plan to do there. They know that our student organisation here is focused on the struggle of our people in East Timor so they have developed a special system of control.

But we know that any day, the Indonesians could become more confrontational. In 1989, when demonstrations took place in Dili, when our youth raised their voices to call for independence for East Timor, the military did not themselves handle the situation probably because they were concerned about the impact on their diplomatic moves. Negotiations were under way about the visit of the Portuguese parliamentary mission to East Timor; this prevented Indonesia from taking a confrontational position. But in October 1990, they failed to reach agreement and the visit was postponed. So they began to adopt a more aggressive,

confrontational stance; many young people were arrested, some were murdered, some tortured. The aim was to trace the location of leadership of the underground.

They watch the East Timorese youth in Indonesia all the time. A time may come when they will become more confrontational if the underground endangers their international position. But at present, they must weigh up the international repercussions of their actions.

There are a number of East Timorese youth groups functioning in Indonesia. Does this reflect any split?
No. Indeed, there are many organisations but they are all working towards the same goal.

The three fronts in the struggle

Up to the late 1970s, the emphasis was on armed struggle. FF said just now that since then, there has been a shift towards political struggle in the towns. Does this mean that the armed struggle is no longer so important? How should we assess the two forms of struggle?
[FF] Up to 1979 or 1980, all activities were concentrated in the bases. But we began to realise that in physical terms, we could not face up to the might of the Indonesian army which has a constant supply of weapons. So our leadership instructed us to be active in the towns. But this does not mean ignoring or give up the military struggle.

Three fronts were opened up, the military front, the underground political or clandestine front and the diplomatic front which had existed since 1975. But a clandestine front was needed to maintain links between the military front and the diplomatic front. From 1978 onwards, when the situation was still very critical, it was very hard to organise this link, primarily because we were always being watched. In 1978, 1979 and 1980, we concentrated on keeping open the lines of communication between the armed struggle in the bush and abroad.

But in 1980, we began to organise mass actions and on 10 June, there was a rebellion and many friends were killed or exiled. We began to recognise the role of the underground struggle in linking the diplomatic front to the military front. But at all times, the leadership of the struggle is in the hands of the military front. The military front had mandated diplomatic representatives abroad to tell the outside world that the struggle in East Timor was continuing. How could this be done? By creating an underground front.

The underground front has two tasks, to create a mechanism to link the diplomatic front with the military front and to organise the masses, to convince our people that those who fought from 1975 till 1980 were still fighting for the people's aspirations.

Since 1980, awareness has heightened. Although, the Indonesians have succeeded in aiming blows at the clandestine movement and have destroyed much of it, we have not been defeated. Why? Because murder and exile only reinforces our nationalism and draws everyone into the underground in East Timor.

There are various underground organisations because the situation differs from place to place. Jakarta is not the same as Bali, Bali is not the same as East Timor. Each underground organisation must fix its own criteria to prevent our activities from being destroyed by the Indonesians. They all pursue a single aim, freedom and liberation for the people of East Timor. The existence of a number of organisations and the emergence of a students organisation – one called **Renetil**, another called **Rejutim**, and others as well, some of which have not yet become very well-known.

But although our movement has made significant progress, this doesn't mean that the military struggle is no longer important. The leadership is in the hands of the military front. The underground and the diplomatic front get their global orientation from the commander.

We can say that in East Timor there is now an urban guerrilla movement – we call it the urbanisation of the guerrillas. But it operates under the supreme commander.

Recently, we have begun to restructure our movement because all young East Timorese men and women are becoming involved. We realise that if there were a challenge, the army would take action. Our focus at present is to devise a new strategy to cope with the Indonesians.

The second point is that in Indonesia a number of opposition groups are operating. The Indonesians call them separatist movements but we don't see them like this. They are pressing for the right to self-determination. Indonesia consists of 26 provinces but they are not united. There are plenty of prospects for the creation of other states. We have known about this type of struggle in Indonesia since the 1960s when we in East Timor had contact with them.

Jakarta's aim, to crush the guerrillas

Some journalists who recently visited East Timor have noted a reduction in the level of armed conflict and a reduction in the number of Indonesian troops. They say ABRI could defeat the guerrillas but refrain from doing because they need East Timor as a training ground. What do you say to this?
[FF] This is something we have thought about. Indonesia is a large military power supported by the USA and other countries. It's wrong to say Indonesia doesn't want to crush the guerrillas. Ever since 1975, their aim has been to crush the guerrillas because they know that the guerrillas disrupt stability and obstruct development in East Timor. So, why doesn't Indonesia crush the guerrillas? Maybe what the journalists say, that Indonesia needs East Timor as a training ground and a project for other countries is part of the answer. But there's more to it than that.

Indonesia has a powerful army yet it has been unable to destroy the guerrillas. Look at what happened in 1976, 1977 and 1978 when Indonesia conducted a massive campaign. Then in 1981 and 1982, they mobilised the entire population to crush the guerrillas, but failed. In 1983, there were negotiations between our commander, Xanana Gusmao and the regional commander, Colonel Purwanto. Indonesia hoped through these negotiations to convince Xanana to surrender, but this did not happen.

The negotiations were very beneficial for Fretilin because all our people could see that a well-organised struggle was still going on. The Indonesians have tried hard to crush the guerrillas but the emergence of urban guerrillas has made this even more difficult. Then there are problems in Indonesia itself. Indonesia cannot possibly deploy all its armed forces in East Timor. This would mean ignoring the challenge in Sumatra, and not fighting the OPM.

Another point is that their campaign needs substantial

economic backing, but this is not easy for Indonesia at present. There is a correlation between Indonesia's inability to crush the guerrillas and difficulties within Indonesia. Perhaps it's true to say that in 1979, Indonesia was more able to handle the guerrillas, but since 1980 it has been much more difficult for them to do this.

When Indonesia started to colonise East Timor, they recognised that winning over the older generation was impossible and tried to win over the youth, setting up many schools, spreading the Pancasila. But they have failed to turn Timorese youngsters into 'good Indonesians'. Why?

[MKR] There are many reasons. Let's look first at history. As compared with various parts of Indonesia, East Timor before the arrival of the Portuguese had hardly any contact with the empires that existed in the rest of the archipelago; at most, links were confined to trade. There is no evidence that the pre-Portuguese kingdoms in East Timor paid tribute to the kingdoms of Sriwijaya or Majapahit. So, even before the Portuguese era, there were differences.

The second thing is that East Timor was colonised by the Portuguese while Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch. There are many differences between them though they both came from western Europe. The Dutch, like the English and the Germans, were not inclined to carry out a policy of assimilation, in contrast with the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Italians who were quick to assimilate. This is what happened in Latin America and also in East Timor. The Portuguese culture absorbed by the Timorese was initially imposed by force but eventually it happened by peaceful means, by assimilation, by inter-marriage between Portuguese men and Timorese women.

Another factor is religion. Before the Dutch reached Indonesia, outside religions - Hinduism and Islam - had taken root. But things were different in East Timor. Each tribe had its own traditional beliefs and these were the religions that came into contact with Catholicism from Portugal.

So during 500 years of Portuguese colonialism, a quite distinct society emerged which helped mold the character of our people. Yet, this process (of peaceful assimilation) did not always prevail. The Timorese people rebelled against the Portuguese throughout the colonial era, from the moment the Portuguese set foot in our country. This has bred a high level of militancy among the Timorese. There were many battles, waged without any help from outside; often these rebellions were suicidal. This hardened our people, made them very tough, never wanting to surrender.

After the political changes in Portugal, East Timorese students who had been studying in Portugal where they had made contact with students from other parts of the world, returned home. They waged a very effective campaign, dealing with concrete issues. Within a year, their campaign was very successful; the effects are still felt today. They succeeded in arousing a nationalist, patriotic fervour among the East Timorese people, particularly in the ranks of Fretilin. This was done by people like Carvarinho, Vicente Reis and others.

When Indonesia came, it became apparent that Indonesian colonialism was very primitive as compared with Portuguese colonialism. The Indonesians were not as skilful as the Portuguese so it wasn't difficult for our people to understand what was going on, even illiterate people who had never been to school. No-one needed to be told, there was no need for any campaigning. The facts were there for all to see. The soldiers sent to East Timor behaved very brutally, caring nothing about human rights or existing regulations. All this happened when things worldwide were changing - there was a global shift towards emanicipation, many nations were fighting for liberation. So the Timorese were very quick to reject what the Indonesians did. This is true also for our youth. Their lessons in school about Indonesian history were empty phrases. such efforts can never succeed unless the East Timorese give up their yearning to liberate themselves - only then will Indonesia get its way.

Indonesia faces challenges to its rule not only in East Timor but also in West Papua and Aceh. Do you see your solution being linked in any way with pressure on Indonesia to become a federation or perhaps even splitting up into several states?

[FF] Some people believe that if East Timor were to win independence, this would set a precedent for other people. But my first point is this: when Indonesia proclaimed independence in 1945, it claimed only the territory under Dutch control, which excludes East Timor.

The question of whether Indonesia becomes a federation or not may be valid but this is an internal affair and has nothing to do with us. Any state structure can undergo transformation. Indonesia today faces many contradictions, especially between the younger and the older generations. We realise that it is very difficult to expect Indonesia to let go of East Timor, partly because, as you suggest, this could set a precedent. But people in Indonesia should realise that independence for East Timor is something that cannot be stopped. Indonesia will continue to face enormous difficulties because the boundaries of our underground struggle will continue to expand. Perhaps the time will come, in ten or twenty years, when we will try to coordinate our actions with the opposition in Indonesia if Jakarta still insists on keeping hold on East Timor.

We know how difficult it is for us to defeat Indonesia militarily but nor can Indonesian defeat us militarily. And because of our diplomatic struggle, Indonesia will remain a focus of the world community, in Europe, the USA and in the Pacific. The diplomatic struggle will be very arduous and tough for Jakarta. If Indonesia continue to stick stubbornly to its position on East Timor, it may be that our solution will be determined by internal Indonesian factors.

Messages to the world

What is your message to the outside world?

First, to countries prompted by economic factors and other national interests and do not understand what we have gone through or refuse to acknowledge the righteousness of our aspirations. They should realise that we are only struggling for our basic right, for the application of international norms in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To solidarity organisations, we express deepest gratitude; please intensify your work and devise new forms of struggle. Don't forget that by helping us achieve independence, you are also helping to improve things globally.

To NGOs like Amnesty International and Asia Watch, we

say: please try harder to find effective ways of convincing the world that human rights violations do take place in East Timor. This is not just a matter of murder, torture and maltreatment; they should explain also why these violations occur – because our people want freedom.

To our East Timorese countrymen abroad, we say: preserve unity and think of how each of you can become involved. Achieving independence depends first and foremost on our own personal efforts. Take part in the struggle, passively or actively. Don't pursue separate political or religious objectives. What we need now is independence. When we have achieved that, both Fretilin and UDT have said they want a multi–party democracy.